Summary

I

The Town at Present: The story is set in Faulkner’s fictional Yoknapatawpha county, in its capital Jefferson. The narrator opens with an account of the changes that took place in the town during the last fifteen years. The town was modernized, trees along the roads were cut down to make way for poles bearing telephone and electricity wires. The streets were paved, the roads were covered with asphalt, a rising number of cars can be seen. A city laundry was established and the few remaining black women who still do the laundry for white people pick and deliver their orders in cars.

Fifteen Years Earlier: Fifteen years ago the streets on Monday were crowded with black laundry women who carried bundles of clothes balanced on their heads. One of the washerwomen was Nancy, a tall black woman with a sad face sunken where her teeth were missing. Nancy did the laundry for the family of the narrator, the nine-year-old Quentin, his brothers, the seven-year-old Caddy and the five-year-old Jason, their father Jason and their mother. The family employed another black woman, Dilsey, as a cook. When Dilsey was sick, Nancy was asked to do the cooking, too. The women did not live in the white family’s house, they stayed in poor cabins in what was called Negro Hollow. Nancy lived with her husband, or boyfriend, called Jesus. He was a short black man with a razor scar down his face. He did not help Nancy, like the husbands of the other laundrywomen sometimes did, and at one point in the story he was warned to stay away from the white family’s house.

Nancy in Difficulties: There had been something wrong with Nancy recently. The boys, represented by the voice of the eldest Quentin, thought that Nancy started drinking. One day Nancy was arrested and when she was being led to the jail, they passed Mr Stovall, a cashier in a bank and a deacon in the Baptist church. Nancy started to ask him when he was going to pay her the money that he owed her. She kept on asking even when Mr Stovall hit her hard and kicked her in the mouth:

‘When you going to pay me, white man? When you going to pay me, white man? It’s been three times now since you paid me a cent—’ […] She turned her head and spat out some blood and teeth and said, ‘It’s been three times now since he paid me a cent’ (p. 291).

This was how Nancy lost the teeth. She spent the night in the jail lamenting loudly and towards morning she attempted to hang herself. She made herself a noose out of her clothes but she could not bind her hands so that she kept on clutching the window bars and could not make her hands let go. A jailer rescued her and concluded that she was on cocaine:

‘He said that it was cocaine and not whisky, because no nigger would try to commit suicide unless he was full of cocaine, because a nigger full of cocaine wasn’t a nigger any longer’ (p. 291).

Nancy’s Fears: Nancy was pregnant with a child whose father was not Jesus, which she openly told him, but a white man, as some hints in the story suggest. One day Jesus left Nancy unexpectedly, and she thought that he went to Memphis. Later Nancy came to believe that Jesus had returned. She had not seen him but she had been told that he was back. She feared to go back home alone through the dark and scary lane which she could not avoid when returning from Mr Jason’s house. The father walked her to her cabin, much to the disapproval of the mother:

‘You’ll leave me alone, to take Nancy home?’ mother said. ‘Is her safety more precious to you than mine?’

‘I wont be long,’ father said.

‘You’ll leave these children unprotected, with that Negro about’ (p. 293-4)?

The boys went, too. They thought that Nancy was afraid of the dark and teased one another on the subject of fearing the dark. Nancy feared that Jesus was up to kill her because, as he had told her, she inspired the worst in him.

II

Overnight at Mr Jason’s: The father kept on walking Nancy home as long as Dilsey was sick. Finally a cot was fixed for Nancy in the house. One night the boys were woken up by strange sounds that Nancy made. It was a curious wailing, something between singing and crying. Nancy spent the rest of the night in the room where the boys slept. She only wailed helplessly when the boys inquired what happened:


Nancy did not sleep any more that night. She played with the boys and told them stories. Dilsey recovered and resumed her duties in the kitchen. The same day Nancy felt that Jesus was out waiting for her. She was so frightened that she was not even able to swallow her coffee. Nancy sensed that her death was approaching, as she told the boys:

‘I hellborn, child,’ Nancy said. ‘I wont be nothing soon. I going back where I come from soon’ (p. 298).

III

Appealing to Adults: Dilsey attempted to comfort Nancy and sent her home, promising that she would come
soon afterwards. Nancy feared to go, believing that no black person would stop Jesus anyway. She sent the boys to ask on her behalf whether she could spend the night in the house. The mother resolutely refused:

‘I can’t have Negroes sleeping in the bedrooms,’ mother said (p. 299).

The mother did not think that Nancy’s problems should concern her. She suggested calling officers. The father explained that the officers could not act on Nancy’s suspicion only, as long as there is no evidence. The boys tried to learn from Nancy why she was afraid of Jesus, but she did not give them any satisfying answers.

**Persuading the Boys:** Nancy persuaded the boys to walk her home. She prevented them from telling the mother, claiming that she would not mind. Walking through the dark lane, Nancy talked very loudly and acted as if Mr Jason was with them, too. The boys were puzzled but amused. Having reached her cabin, Nancy tried to hold the boys back. She attempted to entertain them, but she was being too absent-minded to keep them interested. She told them a story about a queen who had to pass a ditch where a bad man was lying, but they did not like it.

**In Nancy’s Cabin:** Nancy was desperately trying to keep the boys from going. They did not want to stay because they knew that the parents would be looking for them. Jason was especially annoying, he threatened that he would tell. Nancy pacified him for a while by promising him to make some popcorn and let him hold the popper. Nancy’s popper was broken, but she attempted to fix it. The boys kept on wishing to go home and Nancy kept on holding them back. Jason held the popper, but some smoke got in his eyes, and he dropped the popper into the fire.

**Mr Jason’s Coming:** The boys heard somebody coming. Nancy started to wail like she did the night when she stayed with the boys in their room. It was the father coming. Nancy begged the boys to persuade the father to let them stay with her or to let her go to their house:

‘Listen. Tell him. Tell him we going to have fun. Tell him I take good care of yawl until in the morning. Tell him to let me come with yawl and sleep on the floor. Tell him I won’t need no pallet. We’ll have fun. You member last time how we had so much fun?’

‘I didn’t have fun,’ Jason said. ‘You hurt me. You put smoke in my eyes. I’m going to tell’ (p. 306).

**Mr Jason’s Reasoning:** The father did not show any displeasure with Nancy’s action. He tried to reason with her and suggested her going to Aunt Rachel, an old black woman who was thought to be Jesus’s mother. Aunt Rachel at times confirmed and at times denied it. The father tried to persuade Nancy that there was no imminent danger. He would have seen Jesus if he were out there. Nancy insisted that Jesus was after her because she got the sign. A bloody hog-bone was lying on the table when she came in. Nancy pleaded for help but at the same time refused it, believing that she could not avoid her fate:

‘Then what do you want to do?’ father said.

‘I don’t know,’ Nancy said. ‘I can’t do nothing. Just put it off. And that don’t do no good. I reckon it belong to me. I reckon what I going to get ain’t no more than mine’ (p. 307).

The father took the boys and started to leave. Nancy refused to put out the lamp, claiming that she did not want it to happen in the dark. She kept on sitting by the fireplace and wailing.

**Nancy Left Alone:** Nancy did not bar the door when the father left the cabin with the boys. She even left the door open, allegedly because she was tired:

‘I just done got tired,’ she said. ‘I just a nigger. It ain’t no fault of mine’ (p. 309).

The boys could see her sitting by the fire through the open door. When they lost her from sight, they could still hear her. They started to quarrel among one another as to which of them is scared. The father scolded them.

**Analysis**

**Racial Prejudice:** The story focuses on the devastating effects of strained relationships between the blacks and the whites brought about by racial prejudice. These relationships are marked by open hostility or, at best, by mutual incomprehension, which is reinforced in the story by the perspective of the young narrator, too young to interpret what is happening around him in proper terms. The narrator provides only fragmentary information and often deviates from the linear time perspective, which further enhances the effect of confusion and uncertainty.

**Jesus:** The central conflict evolves around Nancy’s pregnancy and Jesus’s reaction to it. Jesus perceives white men as enemies. He clearly realizes the inferior position of the blacks and feels frustrated about it:

‘I can’t hang around white man’s kitchen,’ Jesus said. ‘But white man can hang around mine. White man can come in my house, but I can’t stop him. When white man want to come in my house, I ain’t got no house’ (p. 292).

Nancy’s pregnancy feeds in Jesus his hatred of the whites. Jesus sees Nancy as infected by the whites by conceiving a child of mixed blood. He seeks revenge on her for what he seems to view as Nancy’s betrayal of her race, also he might hope to relieve his own frustrations by giving way to violence.

**Nancy:** Nancy’s own feelings to the whites are not markedly negative. She even turns to a white man, Mr
Jason, for help and protection from her black lover. Nancy’s attitude changes from struggling for her life to a passive acceptance of her fate. Nancy realizes her helplessness as a black woman:

‘I aint nothing but a nigger,’ Nancy said. ‘It aint none of my fault’ (p. 293).

She keeps on repeating this and similar statements throughout the story. It might even imply that her pregnancy could have been caused not by her own corruption but rather by the depravity of the white man. Nancy’s is a perfect victimization in that the victim eventually comes to believe that she deserves to be punished:

‘I reckon it belong to me. I reckon what I going to get ain’t no more than mine’ (p. 307).

**The Whites:** The mother does not take Nancy as a human being and does not consider helping her. The father shows a surprising amount of understanding for Nancy and he sincerely tries to help. His attempts are doomed to fail because being a white man, he cannot naturally understand a black woman’s situation. He approaches Nancy with reasonable suggestions, but reason is not very helpful when handling intuitive women’s fears.

**Conclusion:** The narrator deliberately withholds what happens with Nancy at the end. The story is told retrospectively, with a fifteen-year-long lapse between the time of the narrative and the time of the events. It is therefore not the question of the narrator’s not knowing about Nancy’s fate. Nancy’s final fate is however not the most relevant point in the story. Even if Nancy’s fears were in vain, it would not change the resonance of the story.

**Works Cited**